

23 September 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviets and the Tribes of Southwest Asia (U)

SUMMARY



The Tribes

There are hundreds of tribes belonging to more than a dozen ethnic groups in Afghanistan and neighboring areas of Iran and Pakistan. Most are loosely organized with little or no central authority, but in some the power of the tribal chief is nearly absolute. Some have only a few thousand members; others, several hundred thousand. Some tribesmen are nomadic, most are settled farmers, and a few have abandoned the tribal way of life almost entirely. (U)

These variations occur even within tribes. Pushtun Mohmands (living on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border near the Khyber Pass) include both nomads and farmers, and some members of the tribe have broken with traditional ways altogether to become urban laborers or even physicians and lawyers. (U)

Tribes in Afghanistan

Tribal loyalties have more importance among the Pushtun of eastern and southern Afghanistan than among most of the other ethnic groups. Among the Uzbeks of northern Afghanistan, for example, tribal ties are weak, and they probably are not much stronger for many of the Turkmen of northwest Afghanistan. Even for the Pushtuns, tribal membership usually means little more than a feeling of identity with others in the tribe. Organized

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with OOCR, NIO, NESEA. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center [redacted]


Approved for Release
Date: 11-10-80

PA M 80-10419
SC - 91281-80


action by an entire tribe is rare. An attack on one part of a tribe may bring some response from other tribesmen not directly affected, but each extended family or village usually determines its own course without reference to the rest of the tribe or to the ostensible tribal leaders. (U)

Those who cling most closely to the traditional tribal ways are the least likely to be influenced by Communism. To the extent that the tribesmen have an ideology it is a belief that a combination of Islam and even older tribal traditions is the proper guide for action. Among most tribes, the traditional views include such things as the obligation to seek revenge, masculine superiority, an emphasis on personal bravery and honor, and suspicion of outsiders. Tradition also tends to sanctify everything from rules governing property ownership to ways of treating illness. Any change in the traditional way of life is considered wrong, and modern ideas--whether Communist or Western--are seen as a threat. (U)




The Afghan insurgency has been strongest among the most traditionally minded such as the Pushtuns of Paktia Province and the Nuristanis and Tajiks farther north along the Pakistani border. They resist the Afghan Marxists and the Soviets more to preserve the old ways than to fight Communism. Some of the reforms that have incensed the tribes--education of women for example--are neither Communist nor anti-Islamic, but they conflict with the tribesmen's perception of what is right.



Attitudes developed generations ago when they were nomads are still strong among settled tribesmen, but these are weakening gradually as they experience life as farmers and villagers and have more contact with the outside world. In particular, their traditional tendency to resort to and glorify fighting has waned. Insurgency has been less of a problem among long-settled Pashtun tribes, such as the Popalzai in the Qandahar area, than among the nomads and seminomads of the mountains.



In the tribal villages it is in the interests of the most influential men--local landowners, religious leaders, or both--to reject reforms, especially Communist ones, that threaten both their property and their political power. Nevertheless, Communist programs may have some appeal to the settled tribes. Landless laborers would benefit from land reform, and those already exposed to modern influence would see benefits from increased education--even for women--and better medical care. (U)



A major problem for the Soviets is to convince the tribes that it is to their advantage to support the government. The Soviets can bolster their arguments with offers of weapons and money. They can also threaten retaliation against tribesmen who will not cooperate, or threaten to support their traditional enemies. (U)

Ethnic ties between groups in the USSR and in northern Afghanistan such as the Turkmen, Tajiks, and Uzbeks could also be exploited, although there is little evidence that the Soviets have sought to do so. Such an effort could be especially difficult among the Uzbeks; many Uzbeks fled from the USSR before World War II to escape Communist rule. (U)

[REDACTED]

Even were the tribesmen motivated by more than an opportunity to steal, they would probably regard any arrangement with the Soviets as a temporary expedient and would turn against them as soon as it seemed advantageous to do so. The Soviets are aware of the unreliability of tribal allies. In the past, tribesmen fighting for outsiders have changed alliance in response to offers of better pay, or even when they decided their pay inadequate. A recent book review published in Tashkent made much of Britain's problems in the 19th century in trying to keep Afghan tribes loyal. (U)

[REDACTED]

Tribes in Pakistan

The tribes in the remote and rugged area along the northern part of the Afghan-Pakistani border are probably too small and isolated to be a useful target for the USSR. (U)




To the south are the Pakistani Pushtuns, some of whom are actively supporting the Afghan insurgents, and almost all of whom sympathize with their cause. In the past, the Pushtuns have tended to support politicians with ties to Moscow and Kabul, and perhaps the leading Pakistani Communist is a tribesman--although from the most "civilized" of all the Pushtun tribes. (U)

The Pakistani Pushtuns have long resented domination by the Punjabis to the east and have sought greater autonomy or even outright independence. The Soviets could attempt to exploit this desire, but with Soviets fighting Pushtuns in Afghanistan, the prospects for a positive response from the Pakistani Pushtuns have never been so poor. (U)

Tribes in Iran

There are no important tribes in the sparsely populated area along the southern part of the Iranian-Afghan border. Along the northern part of the border, the population is a mixture of Kurds, Baluch, Turkic speakers, and even Arabs. The two largest ethnic groups are the Serakshi tribes on the Soviet-Iranian border and the Torbat Jamis between Mashhad and the border. (U)

These tribes--like other Iranian minorities--are probably divided politically, with a large proportion of their population politically inactive. Many of them are probably involved in assisting Afghan insurgents, if for no other reason than to boost their income by smuggling. (U)



Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan

